

Soni Foto

Languages We Share

Translated from the original French title "Langues communes"

Foreword

Languages We Share is a collection of short texts about language, silence, identity, and what it means to belong.

Written in English by a multilingual author, these stories are fragments of lived experience — moments that seemed small but stayed, because they revealed something deeper.

Some are quiet. Some sting.

They speak of childhood, work, misunderstanding, exclusion — and the invisible weight of translation, whether between languages or between worlds.

Originally written in French (*Langues communes*), this English version carries the same voice, across borders.

Not everything is explained. Not everything needs to be.

These pages are for anyone who has stood between two languages, two places, two truths — and for those who've felt unseen, even while speaking clearly.

I — Thrown into it too soon

- Doctor, but not that one
- The Language Didn't Wear Me Out. The Gap Did.
- A Good Essay — Clarity That Stings
- One Percent Less

Doctor, but not that one

I was ten or eleven.

My mother said:

— You're going to go with so-and-so to the doctor.

I didn't ask any questions.

"Doctor", to me, was simple: sore throat, fever, open your mouth, say "aaah", then go home with a prescription.

The lady was wearing a dress.

We walked together, not talking much.

She didn't speak French.

I did. Enough to be asked to interpret.

But it wasn't that kind of doctor.

No thermometer. No syrup.

A white room, a discreet desk, a strangely calm atmosphere.

Most of all, a man in a lab coat, behind a desk

I didn't know he was a gynecologist.

I didn't even know that job existed.

In my child's mind, a woman only undressed in front of her parents if she was little, or her husband if she was married.

But she lay down. She spread her legs. And I watched.

I had to translate.

I had to translate, listen, and explain.

Words I didn't always understand.

Gestures I didn't know how to name.

The doctor didn't say a word to me. He didn't suggest I leave.

He could have.

But he didn't.

He needed someone to translate.

And maybe, in case something went wrong, he knew he could say: there was an interpreter.

Me, I wasn't there as a witness.

I wasn't there by choice.

I was there because they put me there —

Without asking if I was ready,

or even if I had the right.

That day, I learned two things:

That some roles are too heavy for a child.

And that the comfort of some rests, sometimes, on the silence of others.

The Language Didn't Wear Me Out. The Gap Did.

*« Le langage, avant de signifier quelque chose, signifie pour quelqu'un. » —
Jacques Lacan*

I was a sworn interpreter. Not full-time, and not as a primary job. It was something I did to help — just a continuation of what I'd always done: lending my voice when needed. I worked on civil cases, criminal cases, sometimes before administrative courts.

A marginal activity, but not a trivial one.

I did my work with rigor, loyalty, and precision.

I believed, like many do, that making language accessible also made justice fairer.

But gradually, unease crept in. Not because of the words themselves.

It was something else: the imbalance of voices.

At every hearing, I saw the gulf between those who spoke the language of the law — fluid, coded, well-oiled —

and those who, even in their own language, couldn't understand what was being said to them. People lost, sometimes frozen, saying yes to everything because they didn't know where they had ended up.

I stood between the two.

My voice was supposed to restore balance.

But I was translating sentences I knew were incomprehensible.

I was lending words to people who didn't even have the tools to respond.

I was no longer a bridge. I had become a filter in a broken system.

One day, without scandal, without drama, I decided to stop.

Not because I didn't want to help anymore.

But because I no longer wanted to participate in a rigged dialogue.

A dialogue where only the initiated were entitled to be heard.

Some will say I ran away. That I abandoned those who needed that voice.
I don't think so. I kept translating elsewhere, for free, where I felt it was right.
Where speech still flowed.

In courtrooms, the setting remained: the robes, the precise words.
But language, real language, no longer flowed.
It confined.

And I wasn't there to confine anyone further.

A Good Essay — Clarity That Stings

It was an essay. A handwritten comment in the margin. Two points deducted. Not for a mistake, but for a point of view.

I was in high school, in French class. We had to hand in an essay. I don't remember the exact topic, but I know what I wanted to do: talk about war — in every sense of the word. Quarrels, conflicts, chaos. That word we use too lightly to describe things much smaller than war — and sometimes to avoid facing how serious it really is.

In my essay, I had written this sentence:

“When people want war, they always find a good reason to justify it.”

It was casual, the kind of observation someone my age might make. Not provocative. Just raw lucidity.

When the teacher handed it back, there were two marks. The first, 15 out of 20, was crossed out. Below it, 13 out of 20, with a handwritten comment.

She said to me: “*The Americans did apologize for Vietnam, you know.*”

I hadn't mentioned any specific war.

But she brought up Vietnam.

As if my sentence had directly targeted that war.

As if using the word “war” required some kind of historical, political, or ideological validation.

What I remember most is not anger, but unease. I didn't argue. I was young.

And even then, I understood something important: lucidity isn't always rewarded.

It's not enough to write what's true.

It also has to fit in the right boxes.

That memory came back to me later, again and again, in other settings.

At work. In meetings. In projects. In interviews.

Saying things too clearly, too simply, too soon —
means risking stepping outside the frame.

Risking disapproval.

Risking being seen as a problem.

It took time to reclaim that kind of clarity.

To dare once again to write what I think — even if it stirs things up a little.

Even if it doesn't please right away.

Today, I'm the one writing.

And this time, I'm handing in my essay elsewhere.

One Percent Less

I was eight when we had a car accident.

We were leaving by car for the Easter holidays, as usual.

Leaving the city to join my uncle and cousins in the countryside.

About thirty kilometers from our destination — the accident.

I remember everything.

The sounds, the impact, the chaos.

I spent three months in the hospital.

My body broken, patched back together.

I made it home just in time for the end of summer break — just enough to start the school year in the new village, the one described in 'Just Next to the Church.'

I arrived at school as if nothing had happened.

I was there, and that was what mattered.

The year went on.

A few months later, I had to miss a week: a long-scheduled operation, post-hospital care.

The teacher had been informed. Everything was in order.

I came back.

End-of-year tests came.

I took the exams. I did my best. I got 84%.

The teacher handed me the paper. He smiled, then leaned toward me:

“You were away for a week. I’ll take off one percent. That’ll make it 83.”

One percent.

Next to nothing, some might say.

But I knew.

The 84% was for the other student.

Not for me.

II — Absent languages, powerless languages

- Even Letters Are Masks
- Collapse of Communication
- Witness
- Just Next to the Church

Even Letters Are Masks

Years after finishing my studies, with solid professional experience behind me, I still maintain my languages.

Some I speak fluently.

Others I try to keep alive — not let them rust.

So I sign up for workshops, refresher courses.

One day, I start a new session.

They give us a form to fill out.

The usual: name, surname, language studied.

Two lines stop me cold:

“What is your main language?”

And just below:

“What is the alphabet of your native language?”

I understand immediately:

They don’t just want to know what I speak.

They want to be able to classify me.

And indeed, when the groups are formed, the sorting goes like this:

Those whose languages use the Latin alphabet on one side.

The others — Arabic, Cyrillic, other systems — on the other.

I could join the first group without question.

My parents’ language is written with Latin letters.

But not exactly the ones people expect.

There are umlauts, cedillas, accents unknown to French.

And even the familiar letters aren’t always pronounced the same way.

So I understand:

Even when everything looks familiar, people can still be wrong about me.

Even with the same letters, I don't say the same things.

And above all:

What they call "alphabet" here is just an excuse to sort bodies and voices —
as if a written costume were enough to grasp a human path.

Letters are masks.

Writing seems to say it all.

But the alphabet never tells the whole story.

I fill out the form.

A little wry, a little tired.

I know that even in the world of language,
you still have to translate what you are.

Even in the very place where languages are supposed to bring us together.

Collapse of Communication

We were driving fast.

Not for fun. Because we had to.

A transit visa, in a country still behind the Iron Curtain — it was a countdown.

We had six hours to cross. No more, no less.

No detours. No unnecessary stops.

Not even a picnic.

In the orange VW, the mood was tense.

We checked the watch as much as the road.

And suddenly, a figure in the middle of the asphalt.

We slowed down, worried.

It wasn't a checkpoint. It was a woman.

She was waving. She seemed alone.

On the tiny roadside, she asked us to follow her.

Not a word we could understand. Just gestures.

The car was there. Parked.

Someone said:

— What if it's a trap?

But we followed.

It was a family. A couple, two children.

The youngest in the father's arms.

The oldest... lying down.

On the grass, near a stream.

Unconscious. Maybe worse.

They had tried water. Shade. Nothing worked.

We tried to understand.

We spoke English, French, a bit of German, a bit of Italian.

Nothing got through.

They spoke a language we didn't know.

We gestured. We stepped closer, stepped back.

We looked at the boy who wouldn't wake up.

We didn't know how to call.

We couldn't help.

We couldn't even find the words to say we were sorry.

They weren't from that country either.

They, too, were in transit.

They, too, were outside of language.

So we left.

Hearts in pieces.

With this strange thought:

Please, let a soldier stop us.

Let him ask why we're late.

So we can at least show him the place.

Witness

Tense. Almost motionless.

Her hands clenched inside her coat.

They had told her to say what she saw.

She was trying.

The words came slowly, clinging to each other in one long breath.

Her language didn't pause — you had to take it all in, or nothing made sense.

She repeated. Again.

Always the same sentences.

Always the same three images:

a car, a sharp sound, a figure.

No more. Just that, on repeat.

I waited. I listened.

Then I gently asked if there was anything else.

She said no. She lowered her eyes.

I turned to the lawyer. I translated:

— She says she saw a grey car hit the curb.

That a man got out.

That he left quickly.

And that's all she can say.

He looked at me, frowning.

— That's all? But she spoke for quite a while...

I stayed silent for a moment.

I was young. I doubted myself.

And yet, I had listened to every word.

I told him:

— She repeated the same things, several times.

She has nothing more to add.

He wrote it down without answering.

I said nothing more.

But something in me hardened that day:

Just because someone speaks a lot doesn't mean they say more.

And just because I say little doesn't mean I've betrayed what was said.

Just Next to the Church

A story of memory and silence

Every year, we commemorate the end of the Second World War, lay wreaths, ring the bells.
And yet, some silences have never ceased.

This is not a war story. It is a childhood memory.
But it falls within a continuity of memory, where the scars of the past meet other wounds —
quieter, more insidious: those of exclusion.

We had left the city to settle in a small village of two or three hundred people.
There was one school, a single class for all levels, from first to sixth grade.
The schoolteacher taught a group of about twenty students on his own.

One day, the whole class was invited to a birthday party.
The girl lived on the edge of the village, in a house surrounded by woods, near a pond.
The parents had organized carpooling. It was even the teacher who drove us there, as my
father was at work.
I remember the house — spacious — and our outing by the pond. Everyone was there.
Everything went naturally.

A few weeks later, it was my older sister's birthday.
This time, we invited the whole class.
We had carefully prepared snacks, set a nice table.
But no one came.

We waited for hours without touching the cake.
Toward the end of the afternoon, a teenage girl from the village — no longer attending the
school and not someone we expected — showed up.
She explained, casually:
“I heard a foreign family had moved into the village, so I wanted to see what you looked
like.”

So it wasn't really about the birthday.
It was mostly curiosity.
But at least she came.
She smiled, shared the cake, spent time with us.
She was present, where all the others had chosen not to be.

Our house was on one of the village's main roads, right next to the church —
or rather, what was left of it.
Behind our garden was a vacant lot covered in rubble.

As children, we played there.
It was only much later that we learned it had been the ruins of the old church, destroyed
during the Battle of the Ardennes.
The new church, built in 1969, stood just across from our house.
Every vehicle entering the village passed in front of us, the rubble, that buried history no one
wanted to name.

When you're a child, you don't understand everything — but you feel.
The looks, the silences, the avoidance.
That day, seeing no one come, I understood something else:
That invitations aren't enough when you're not invited to belong.

It was just a birthday. Just a village.
But to me, it became the symbol of a deeper silence.
A collective silence, woven from legacies we refuse to face, wounds we deny, differences we
don't want to acknowledge.

And also, sometimes, from assumptions.
People looked at us as if History clung to our skin —
a History assigned to us without knowing us, without even trying to understand.

There was also another silence: the one surrounding the visit of that man from my family.
He had fought in Korea, alongside Belgian soldiers.
He came to visit us in that village, in that house, only once.

No one asked questions.
A few curious glances, perhaps, but no words.
As if that part of his story didn't exist —
or had no place here.

He spent hours sitting in the garden, facing the vacant lot,
where the church once stood,
where only rubble remained.

Nothing was said.
No questions.
No lingering gaze.
The silence was complete —
as if that part of his story had no connection to the place,
to that village.

Maybe the villagers had never imagined that people like us — of foreign origin — had fought
alongside their own.
That we were on the same side, sharing the same cause.
And yet, it changed nothing.
The rejection was there, untouched.

We were there, just next to the church.

Testimony shared as part of a process of memory and recognition.

III — Standards, resources, transmissions

- The Little Underwear
- The Voice of Need
- Röntgen

Interlude : Frère Jacques, Lingua Franca

The Little Underwear

When my nieces came to spend time at my place, it was always joyful.

Being an aunt means having only the best parts: the games, the laughter, the snacks.

No homework, no arguments. Just pure fun.

One day, one of them asked me if I had any dolls.

She had plenty herself — she adored them.

I told her no, that I was an adult now, and adults didn't play with dolls anymore.

And then... I remembered.

I had kept one. Just one.

A doll long forgotten in a cupboard.

I went to get it.

It dated back to 1972.

A doll like they don't make anymore: tall, upright, with long, very light blond hair — almost white.

She still wore her original dress: brown, short, with a white Peter Pan collar and a row of little printed flowers along the hem.

She looked like the children in 1970s fashion catalogs, still echoing the sixties: mini-dress and stylized innocence.

My niece picked her up, curious. She wanted to dress her. She lifted the dress.

And suddenly, she gasped:

— Auntie! She's not wearing any underwear!!

I looked at her. Her face was shocked — almost scandalized.

I burst out laughing.

— She's completely naked underneath! She insisted, very serious.

And then I understood.

In her world, all dolls came with built-in underwear.

In mine, no one even thought about it.

This doll had spent forty peaceful years in her flowered dress,
and no one had ever blamed her for her freedom.

But that day, she ran into a new norm —
and she was judged.

The Voice of Need

Some long trips, we used to take with an uncle.

They were straightforward crossings, through countries where everything was counted:
kilometers, hours, visas.

Borders were crossed at a walking pace.

Sometimes we traveled in convoy, escorted by armed soldiers.

Every minute was timed.

The visa too.

There was no room to linger.

One day, right in the middle of one of those countries, we ran out of food.

No shops in sight.

And no one spoke English — not even us, or barely.

The landscape passed by without promise: rare villages, cold silences.

Then my uncle said:

— We can't just stay here. I'm going to ask around... and find supplies.

We looked at him, a little worried.

He didn't speak a word of the local language.

And yet, he went.

It took him a while to come back.

Half an hour. Maybe more.

Then he returned with fresh bread, some vegetables, and a bag of provisions.

And on top of that — completely relaxed.

Surprised, we asked:

— But how did you do it?

He smiled:

— While walking, I came across a little market.

I said the words. The names of the food, out loud.

Someone understood me. They pointed me to a bakery.

I went there. And since I was a foreigner, they offered me breakfast.

Tea, warm bread, jam.

They were kind. I took my time.

We would never have dared to shout in the street: ‘Bread! Milk! Tomatoes!’

We were never taught to ask like that.

But he trusted.

In the body, in the voice, in the need.

And that day, need spoke — and was heard.

Röntgen

In German class, one word caught our attention: *Röntgen*.

We were reading a dialogue set in a hospital. And that word didn't make sense.

Until the teacher explained: *Röntgen* is the name of the person who discovered X-rays.

In German, his name is used to mean "X-ray".

Years later, abroad, I had to get an X-ray.

I didn't know how to say it in the local language.

I handed over my prescription and waited.

A nurse called out: my name + *Röntgen*.

And suddenly, everything fell into place.

I understood. No translation needed.

Memory had made the connection.

And in that connection, a kind of relief.

As if naming was already a form of healing.

Interlude — Frère Jacques, Lingua Franca

My first job: serving as a bridge between engineering teams who didn't speak the same language.

Some worked in French, others in English.

The English-speaking team shared my office.

After a few days, a small group approached me, visibly uneasy.

They had a request. I encouraged them to speak.

— You speak French very well, right? one of them asked.

— Yes, I grew up here. I studied in French. It's my language.

— Would you... be willing to sing?

I thought it was a joke. But no.

— There's this song... Jak... something...

— *Frère Jacques?*

— Yes! That's the one! It's famous!

So I sang it softly.

Frère Jacques, dormez-vous, dormez-vous...

They listened with childlike smiles.

The quiet prestige of the French language.

IV — Trust, Recognition, Belonging

- Subtle Signs
- Invitation to Belong
- I Don't Translate Lies

Interlude: Labor Day – Not Working

Subtle Signs

The first time, it was over the phone, at my very first job.

I'd been hired for my language skills, but I quickly realized they'd mostly underpaid me, taking advantage of my beginner's enthusiasm.

One day, they transferred me a call from America.

"It's the big boss," the director's secretary told me. "He only speaks English."

I answered the call. I couldn't understand a word.

The man spoke fast, with an accent I didn't know.

I stayed calm. I asked him to repeat, politely, two or three times.

Eventually, I understood. I wrote everything down carefully and passed on the key information to my director.

A few weeks later, that same boss visited us.

He stopped by my office and introduced himself.

I did the same and apologized for making him repeat himself that day on the phone.

He replied:

"It's me who should apologize. I only speak one language. You speak several — and that's admirable."

—

The second time was at another job, in the higher levels of administration.

A colleague was expecting a baby. We were organizing a group gift.

The department head came to my office and asked me to take care of it.

I didn't like that kind of thing, but I agreed.

I bought the flowers, the gift, prepared the card, kept a detailed list, saved the receipts, and returned the change.

I came back to the head's office with all the documentation.

She looked at me and simply said:

“You didn't have to do all that. I asked you because I knew it would be done well.”

—

The third time was lighter.

Still at the office, in a department where colleagues were often out — meetings, missions.

One day, I overheard a conversation between two senior staff.

They were wondering if someone would be staying in the office, just in case.

One listed a few names.

The other added, “And here?”

And I heard, just before the door closed:

“Soni is here.”

Then, walking away down the corridor, they added:

“Then we're fine. The place is in good hands.”

They didn't know I could hear them.

And I said nothing.

But I remember it.

An Invitation to Belong

“There are invitations that don’t just say: come in. They whisper: you have a place here.”

For one month, I had the chance to publish here, on Mediapart.

This invitation to *belong* to such a respected platform was both an honour and a meaningful recognition.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Mediapart for opening this writing space to me.

Here, I found a place of listening, of thought, of shared memory.

Writing here allowed me to lay down fragments of lived experience — quiet stories, personal views — without needing to justify their existence.

Thank you for that trust. Thank you for that hospitality.

This month comes to an end.

But the words, they continue to travel.

I Don't Translate Lies

She came home that day more tired than usual.

“Mum, he lied. And he asked me to translate his lie. I don't do that.”

My older sister never raised her voice. She just said things as they were.

She often helped with translations — she was talented, patient, and trustworthy.

People would come to her when the paperwork got too complicated,

when the administration couldn't understand their French,

when a form had to be filled or a lawyer contacted.

Always for free.

She had helped a young widow.

Her husband had died in a car accident on his way to work.

She didn't understand a word of what the insurance people were saying.

My sister went with her, more than once.

She did everything to help the woman be heard.

In the end, the widow received compensation.

For her, it was a small fortune.

The neighbours talked.

They realized that a work-related death could 'pay well.'

Requests started coming in.

Still for free, of course.

Except now some were asking for more than just help.

They wanted the story adjusted.

To turn a late return into a work trip.

To suggest the employer was to blame.

That day, my sister understood.

What they wanted wasn't help anymore — it was betrayal.

And she said no.

—

I'm her younger sister.
I didn't have to think long.
It wasn't a lesson. It was a line.
Invisible, but clear.

Years later, I was working in an office with a team of engineers.
Half from America, half from Europe.
Everyone spoke English —
except the director, who only spoke French.
I was the bridge.

One day, the director came to see me.
He asked me, gently,
to keep him updated about what the engineers were saying to each other.
What they might be thinking.
Nothing urgent, just... to know.

I was surprised, but my answer came instantly:
"No. I don't do that."
He smiled, a little embarrassed.
Maybe improvised a reason.
I looked at him.
"It's not something you should be asking me."
He said nothing, and walked away.

—

People often think interpreters, or anyone who understands both sides,
only have to carry words across.

But sometimes, those words are worth too much — or not enough.

And in those moments, it's not about language.

It's about the position you choose.

On the right side of the sentence.

Or not.

I chose.

Like she did.

Interlude: Labor Day – Not Working

This time, it was the American team. May 1st was coming up.

I said, quite naturally:

— May 1st won't work. I won't be coming in.

— Oh, you took a day off? one of them asked.

— No, it's a public holiday. Day off for everyone.

They looked at each other, a bit puzzled.

Then one of them said, half-serious:

— Isn't it strange? Celebrating work... by not working.

I didn't know what to say.

I hadn't yet grasped everything that date could mean:

Socialism, workers' struggles... and a hint of communism.

To them, it smelled of subversion.

To me, it was just a day without an alarm clock.

V — Slips, Misunderstandings, and Inventions

- Translating a Book in Two Days
- The 'Sheep Festival' (Eid al-Adha)
- The Pocket Phone

Interlude: Interlude: That Day, I Put Strawberries in the Welds

Translating a Book in Two Days

She arrived with a smile, a book in her hand, and that friendly tone of old reunions.
We hadn't seen each other in at least ten years.

We chatted, shared our lives, our detours, our little successes.
Then she told me about this book she had agreed to translate, from French into English.
That surprised me — normally, you translate into your native language.
But well, to each their method.

— Could you help me?

I was taken aback. This weekend was meant for catching up,
not for assembly-line translation.
She saw my hesitation and insisted:

— You're used to this. You studied it. You've spoken both. You've spoken many languages all
your life. It'll be easy for you.

She had no idea how much work a real translation takes.
Reading, understanding, researching, documenting, structuring.
It's not just mirroring words.
It's writing a new text that stays true to the other.

That day, I understood that for many people, translation is like doing the dishes:
everyone thinks they know how to do it.

The 'Sheep Festival' (Eid al-Adha)

One day, I heard on the news:

“Tomorrow is the sheep festival.”

I was confused.

A festival? For a sheep?

I searched my school memories, the calendar, general history — nothing.

I started to doubt my own general knowledge.

Then, checking dates and traditions, I understood.

It was Eid al-Adha.

A deeply rooted religious holiday I had known all my life.

Renamed, simplified — or maybe misunderstood.

“Sheep festival”...

As if the animal was the focus.

As if the ritual no longer carried any meaning.

They had erased the word *sacrifice* — too weighty, too religious perhaps.

Kept the sheep.

More digestible for mainstream audiences.

This shortcut shocked me.

Not because of religion,

but because it revealed something deeper:

What a society chooses to name — or not.

And how, by trimming the words,

we end up emptying rituals of their meaning.

The Pocket Phone

GSM, cell phone, mobile...

Three words for the same object.

And in other languages, they say: pocket phone.

Beautiful, isn't it?

A phone that fits in your pocket.

That stays with you.

That rests in your hand, like a secret.

Each word tells the story of an era.

GSM — the technology, the network.

Cell phone — the function.

Mobile — the movement.

And pocket — the intimacy of it.

It's not just about language.

It's a cultural mirror.

A way to express what this object has become for us.

A tool, a connection, sometimes a refuge.

And behind each word, a little translation of the world.

Interlude: That Day, I Put Strawberries in the Welds

I was translating technical sheets about welding processes.
Process sheets full of unknown terms I learned on the fly.
One day, I came across a French word: *fraisage* — milling.
It was a grey day. I had an idea.

In English, I wrote *strawberry*.

Just to see.

Just to breathe.

Just a small joke, in the middle of all that metal.

A few days later, some engineers showed up with the document in hand, looking a bit puzzled.

They didn't speak French. And they were stuck:

— *Strawberry? Strawberry?* What does welding have to do with it?

I explained everything: the French word, just a pun, a wink.

They sighed. Then they laughed — but a bit uneasily.

That day, I understood: humor doesn't always survive welding.

Since then, I translate seriously.

Even when I itch to slip something in.

VI – What we see without being seen

- The Hot Potato
- Less Than the Others
- Not That Kind of Ambition

The Hot Potato

It was a temporary assignment. A stopgap contract, as they say.
I thought I was there to help — just to handle a peak in workload.
But they clearly had other plans.

By the second week, the thorniest files landed on my desk.
“Historical” files, as they called them, the ones no one wanted to touch anymore.
I took them. I worked. I untangled, I sorted, I replied.
And they? They stuck to their routine.
Chill. Unbothered.

One day in a meeting, a recurring issue comes up. A real headache.
Who’s going to handle it? Who has time?
One of the managers, casually, says:
— Well... Soni will do it.

I turn around. I don’t understand.
I’m the temp. I don’t have the rank, nor the visibility.
Others are here too. More permanent. More senior.

He insists, smiling:
— We’ll just hand her the hot potato.
Then, as if it were obvious, almost indifferent:
— That’s what she’s here for, right?

And then I get it.
I wasn’t there to help.
I was there to take it all in.
I had become the invisible solution to all their messes.

That day, I said nothing.
But something froze inside me.
It wasn't an oversight. It was an organized slide.
When some are protected by status,
It's often because others, without it,
Carry the weight in silence.

Less Than the Others

It was a well-known company.

A signed contract, not a replacement.

I worked among legal experts — sharp, well-educated, some very self-assured.

I wasn't a legal expert. But I knew what I knew.

One day, the conversation shifted to literature.

A name came up: Georges Simenon.

I mentioned, without insisting:

— Simenon is a Belgian author. Like me.

They looked at me, slightly surprised.

Then someone corrected me:

— No. Simenon is French.

I clarified:

— He was born in Liège. He's Belgian. That's a fact.

But it was no use.

They insisted. There were several of them.

Lawyers. So, they knew.

Me? I wasn't a lawyer.

So I couldn't possibly know.

They had decided my words didn't count.

Not even on something I did know.

Not even about my own culture.

I didn't convince them.

They were too many. Too certain. Too confident in their own status.

That day, I understood that telling the truth isn't enough.
You also need the right pedestal to say it from.
And above all:
never sound like you're contradicting those
born to always be right.

Not That Kind of Ambition

She wasn't the boss. But she acted like she was.
An assistant who'd been there forever.
She had her routines, her files, her quiet authority—built up over time.
And maybe also from the emptiness around her.

When I arrived, she sensed something.
I wasn't after anything. I was just doing my job.
But I wasn't pliable. Not intimidated.
And I had more experience than she did.
My French was sharper. I had a natural autonomy.
She couldn't treat me like an intern.
And that unsettled her.

She became curt. She avoided. She imposed.
But never directly. She knew that wouldn't work.

The team leader saw everything—but said nothing.
One day, he finally threw out a line, with a vague smile:
“You're not the scheming type. Though you come from a country where palace intrigue is a thing...”

I looked up. Said nothing.

Later, he added, like he knew me inside out:
“You don't have ambition, do you?”
I asked what made him say that.

He looked me straight in the eye:
“You don't sleep around. If you did, we'd know.”

—

That, to him, was ambition.
Not skill. Not steadiness. Not precision.
Real merit, in his mind, was a transaction.

I was speechless for a moment.
Not from shame. From clarity.

What he said wasn't about me.
It was about them.
Their way of measuring worth.
Their way of ranking, suspecting, assuming.
Their fear of those they can't shape.

I had come just to work.
But that wasn't what they were expecting.

« Trouver le mot juste, c'est retrouver l'équilibre du monde. »

— *Madeleine Gagnon*

Languages We Share

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About the Translations

This multilingual collection, conceived and published by Soni Foto, aims to share universal human experiences through multiple languages — language, communication, identity.

The translations were carried out by the author, sometimes with the help of tools or external proofreading, depending on the language. Some versions were not extensively reviewed, which may result in minor differences.

The goal is not perfection, but the free circulation of ideas across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This project follows an independent, non-commercial approach.

Note to readers

Some texts evoke the world before the internet and cell phones. They don't judge. They tell of moments of helplessness, as they were experienced.

Five of the texts in this collection were first published in June 2025 on a personal blog hosted by Mediapart. They are reprinted for the sake of continuity and circulation.

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Contact : sonifotocom@gmail.com

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